

Author's Note, 2012

In 1998, three years after this book was first published, I wrote a new preface for it titled “A Celebration.” It was an invitation for all of us to feel good about how many people had discovered they were highly sensitive and found the book useful, and that the idea was catching on in the scientific world. Now we can celebrate about fifty times more of the same. *The Highly Sensitive Person* has been translated into fourteen languages, from Swedish, Spanish, and Korean to Hebrew, French, and Hungarian. There have been articles about high sensitivity in many prominent media throughout the world. In the U.S., that has ***included a feature in Psychology Today***, a ***shorter discussion in Time***, and many women’s and health magazines such as *O Magazine* as well as numerous health websites. There are “HSP Gatherings” and courses on the subject in the U.S. and Europe, plus YouTube videos, books, magazines, newsletters, and websites and all sorts of services exclusively highly sensitive persons—most good and some, well, not as good. Tens of thousands subscribe to my own newsletter, *Comfort Zone*, at hsperson.com, where there are now hundreds of newsletter articles archived covering every aspect of being highly sensitive. We have come a long way.

[level A] Three Revisions, Right Here

Given that this book was written at the very beginning of a minor revolution, I have thought I should revise it. But when I look it over, there’s not much I would change. It does the job well, with three exceptions. Most important of these, I wanted to add the expanded scientific research. That’s vital because it helps us all to trust that this trait is real, that what is in this book is real. This preface will update you on this research.

Second, there is now a simple, comprehensive description of the trait, “DOES,” that expresses its facets nicely. D is for depth of processing. Our fundamental characteristic is that we observe and reflect before we act. We process everything more, whether we are conscious of it or not. O is for being easily overstimulated, because if you are going to pay more attention to everything, you are bound to tire sooner. E is for giving emphasis to our emotional reactions and having strong empathy, which among other things helps us notice and learn. S is for being sensitive to all the subtleties around us. I will say more about these four when I discuss the research.

Third, a smaller point can be taken care of right now--the discussion in the book of anti-depressants, which focused on Prozac. Medications for treating depression have proliferated since 1996, as have the pros and cons about them. Do they damage the rest of the body? Are they just placebos for most people, making them feel good

to the same degree as if they had been given a sugar pill? But what about many suicides they have surely saved? The people no longer depressed, which also improved the lives of people close to them? The arguments on both sides are still there, both worth understanding. Thankfully these are now all on the internet somewhere (but stick to reading about scientific research—skip the horror stories, on either side). So my basic advice is the same: Become very well informed; then decide for yourself. Preferably form an opinion before you ever become depressed, because under certain circumstances highly sensitive people are genetically more susceptible to depression and it is a difficult decision when you are in the thick of it.

At this point, if you are not interested in the research on sensitivity, you can stop reading or just skim. Perhaps you are the type understands this trait intuitively or from the heart, no need for the intellect. However, I imagine that you sometimes find that you have to satisfy others' skepticism or even hostility about your suggestion that you are highly sensitivity, and you might like some tools for handling such times, which research findings can provide.

[level A]The Research since 1996

Not only has science verified so much of what's in this book (some of which was only based on my observations at the time), but the findings have gone far beyond what we knew when I wrote this. I have tried to keep what follows interesting, but with enough detail to satisfy those who really want to know. You can find the full methodology and results by reading the articles themselves. ***I published a good summary of the theory and research in 2012*** and a current list of studies can always be found at www.hsperson.com. Sensory processing sensitivity is the scientific name I have given the trait (not at all the same as Sensory Processing Disorder or Sensory Integration Disorder, which alas was given a similar name). I should add that concepts very much like sensitivity are being studied by other researchers. If you are interested in this work, you can look up terms such as Biological Sensitivity to Context (Thomas Boyce, Bruce Ellis, and others), differential susceptibility (Jay Belsky, Michael Pluess, etc), and Orienting Sensitivity (D. Evans and Mary Rothbart, etc.) and find even more research, all done since *The Highly Sensitive Person* was written.

[level B]The First Research

The very first published studies we did (myself and my husband, who is unusually good at designing research) generated the Highly Sensitive Person (HSP) Scale in this book. This research was also intended to demonstrate that high sensitivity is not the same as introversion or “neuroticism” (professional jargon for a tendency

to be depressed or excessively anxious). We were right; the trait was not the same. But it was strongly associated with neuroticism. I had a hunch about why, and *our second series of studies, published in 2005*, verified it: HSPs with a troubled childhood are more at risk of becoming depressed, anxious, and shy than non-sensitive people with a similar childhood; but those with good-enough childhoods were no more at risk than others, and there was some indication—and more since—that they are perhaps slightly healthier and happier than non-sensitive people. *A later study by Miriam Liss and others* found the same result, mainly for depression. Remember this is “on the average.” Some sensitive people with good childhoods may still be depressed and some with poor childhoods will not be. Further, many other things besides childhood difficulties affect us. The level of stress one lives under is surely one large factor.

This interaction of the trait and one's childhood environment explains the relatively strong association between neuroticism or negative feelings and high sensitivity that we found in the first study. Roughly half of the questions on the HSP Scale tap negative feelings—“I am made uncomfortable...” “I get rattled...” “I am annoyed...” and so forth. Since many HSPs have had difficult childhoods, often because no one understood their innate temperament, their persistent bad feelings due to that could cause them to feel even more uncomfortable, rattled, or annoyed in situations that bother all sensitive persons to some degree. This would have added to the overlap of high sensitivity and neuroticism for a reason that has nothing to do with the trait itself. When we use the scale now, we have various ways of asking people how much negative emotion they feel generally and take that into account statistically.

Unfortunately *quite a few clinical studies* of the relationship between being highly sensitive and, for example, being anxious, stressed, or having communication phobias have not taken the role of “nurture” into account, making it seem that all HSPs have these problems. Hence I will not describe that research here.

[level B]Serotonin and HSPs

This finding about the additional impact on HSPs of their childhood, good and bad, adds a nice footnote to something I said in this book, in the chapter on doctors and medications. I cited a study by Stephen Suomi about a minority of rhesus monkeys who are born with a trait that was originally called “up tight” because they were more affected by being raised under stressful conditions. Not only did they appear more depressed and anxious, but like depressed humans, they had less serotonin available in their brains, what anti-depressants correct. Serotonin is a chemical used in at least 17 places in the brain in order to move around information. As it turned out, these

vulnerable monkeys had a genetic variation that results in lower levels of serotonin generally, and these levels are further reduced by stress. Sensitive humans have the same genetic variation. Interestingly that variation is only found in two primate species, humans and rhesus monkeys, and both are highly social and able to adapt to a wide range of environments. Perhaps the highly sensitive members of a group are better able to notice the subtleties, such as which new foods can be safely eaten and which dangers to avoid, allowing them to survive better in a new place.

There are many, many genetic variations in all of us—hair, eye, and skin color, for example, or special abilities or certain phobias. Some of these variations appear to serve little purpose; others are useful or not (or even a disadvantage) depending on the environment. If you live where there are many poisonous snakes, having an innate fear of them could be an advantage, but perhaps become a problem if you want to be a science teacher.

Anyway, since I wrote the book and explained about those monkeys, again, some research ***done in Denmark by Cecilie Licht and others*** suggests that HSPs have the same genetic variation. For years research had only looked for its association with depression, and the results were highly inconsistent, probably because in some studies they had included inadvertently too many sensitive people with good childhoods for depression to show up. There had to be some positive reason for so many people having what should be an evolutionary disadvantage, a “tendency to depression.” ***Now new research*** demonstrates that this genetic variation causing lower serotonin to be available in the brain also bestows benefits, such as improved memory of learned material, better decision making, and overall better mental functioning, plus gaining even more positive mental health than others from positive life experiences. The same mental benefits are also found in ***rhesus monkeys with the same genetic variation***. Perhaps the best vindication for HSPs tired of being seen as weaklings or sick is ***a study by Suomi*** finding that rhesus monkeys with this trait, if raised by skilled mothers, were more likely to show “developmental precocity,” resilience to stress, and be leaders of their social groups.

In the same vein, ***a growing body of research by others*** suggests that some individuals are especially sensitive and therefore more susceptible to their environment—for example, as children they are more affected by parenting, by teachers, and by interventions to help them. What is the underlying trait that leads to this “for better and for worse” outcome for us?

[Level A]What Makes Us So Different?

As I wrote in this book, many species—***now we know it's over 100***, so far, including fruit flies and some fish species--have a minority that are highly sensitive. Although obviously the trait leads to different behaviors,

depending on whether you are a fruit fly, fish, bird, dog, deer, monkey, or human, a general description of it would be that the minority that has inherited it has adopted a survival strategy of pausing to check, observe, and reflect on or process what has been noticed before choosing an action. Slowness to act, however, is not the hallmark of the trait. When sensitive individuals see right away that their situation is like a past one, thanks to having learned so thoroughly from thinking over that last time, they can react to a danger or opportunity faster than others. For this reason, the most basic aspect of the trait—the depth of processing—has been difficult to observe. Without knowing about it, when someone paused before acting, others could only guess what was happening inside that person. Often HSPs were thought to be inhibited, shy, fearful, or introverted (*in fact, 30% of HSPs are actually extraverts*, and many introverts are not HSPs). Some HSPs accepted those labels, having no other explanation for their hesitancy. Indeed, feeling different and flawed, some of us found the label shy or fearful of social judgment self-fulfilling, as I describe in Chapter Five. Others knew they were different, but hid it and adapted, acting like the non-sensitive majority.

Understanding why we evolved as we did tells us much more about ourselves than I knew when I wrote this book. At that time I thought our sensitivity had evolved because the trait served the larger group, as sensitive individuals can sense a danger or opportunity that the others miss, while these others serve by doing something about it once they are alerted. This may still be partly true, but that may only be a side effect of the trait. The current explanation comes from a computer model done by biologists in the Netherlands. **Max Wolf and his colleagues** were curious about how sensitivity might evolve, so they set up a situation using a computer program in order to keep all other factors out of the picture. Then they varied just a few things at a time and watched to see what happened when they ran out the various possible situations and strategies to see if being highly responsive could be a successful enough trait to remain in a population (traits that make us unsuccessful at life don't last long).

The sensitive strategy was tested by setting up the scenario in which they varied how much an individual learning from Situation A, being more sensitive to everything that happened there, was more successful at Situation B because of that information (they also had to vary the amount of benefit that came with being successful in Situation B). The other extreme scenario was such that being sensitive in Situation A provided no help in Situation B because the two had nothing to do with each other. The question was, under what conditions would you see the evolution of two types of individuals, one using the strategy of learning from experience and one not? It turned out

that there only had to be a small benefit for the two strategies to emerge, hence explaining why the two would exist in real people.

You might think that being sensitive is always an advantage, but many times it is not. Indeed, sensitivity only serves the individual if he or she is in the minority. If everyone were sensitive it would be no advantage, as when, if everyone knows a short cut and uses it, there are so many making use of the information that it benefits no one. In short, sensitivity, or responsiveness as these biologists also called it, involves paying more attention to details than others do, then using that knowledge to make better predictions in the future. Sometimes you are better off doing so, other times it is a waste of energy.

Sensitivity does have its costs, as you know. It really can be a waste of energy if what is happening now has nothing to do with your past experiences. Further, when a past experience was very bad, an HSP can overgeneralize and avoid or feel anxious in too many situations, just because the new ones resemble in some small way the past bad one. The biggest cost to us of being highly sensitive, however, is that our nervous system can become overloaded. Everyone has a limit as to how much information or stimulation can be taken in before getting overloaded, over stimulated, overaroused, overwhelmed, and just *over*! We simply reach that point sooner than others. Fortunately, as soon as we get some downtime we recover nicely.

[Level A]It's Really in Our Genes

When I wrote the book, I said sensitivity is innate. I knew it had been found in children from birth and in animals, where the genetics had been identified, plus you can selectively breed animals to be more sensitive. But I had no genetic research using the HSP Scale on which to base that claim. Now it exists. I already mentioned one study that found scores on the test were related to a variation in a gene known to affect the availability of serotonin in the brain. **Chen and his associates**, working in China, took a different approach. Rather than looking at a specific gene with known properties, they looked at all of the gene variations affecting the amount of dopamine available in our brain (98 in all), another chemical necessary for the transmission of information in certain areas of the brain. They found the HSP Scale associated with 10 variations on 7 different dopamine-controlling genes. Although everyone agrees that much of our personalities are inherited, no researchers had found genes as strongly associated as this when they studied the standard personality traits, such as introversion, conscientiousness, or agreeableness. These researchers in China looked at high sensitivity instead, believing it to be more “deeply rooted in the nervous system.”

Interestingly, it was combinations of the genetic variations that predicted the trait, and the function of those variations were mostly unknown, so the genetics of personality are going to be very complicated to figure out. Also, getting the same results again using the same methods is notoriously difficult with genetic studies for some reason; we will need to see more studies like these to be sure. Nevertheless, I feel even more confident that this is an inherited trait.

[level A]We Do Exist as a Distinct Set of People

Although I said in this book that usually you are either highly sensitive or not, I had no direct evidence for that point either. I assumed it because Jerome Kagan of Harvard found it true for the trait of inhibitedness in children, and that seemed to be an understandable misnomer for sensitivity, given that it was based on observing children who do not rush into a room full of complicated, strange toys, but pause to look at it first. But many scientists thought sensitivity must be more like height, with most people in the middle. For a doctoral thesis at the University of Bielefeld in Germany, *Franziska Borries did a particular statistical analysis* that distinguishes between categories and dimensions in a study of over 900 people who took the HSP Scale. She found that being highly sensitive is indeed a category, not a dimension. Mostly you either are or you are not.

It's difficult to know the exact percentage in any given population, as there will always be reasons why there might be more or less than 15 to 20%. Plus, many factors affect how a person scores, so that some people will score in the middle for other reasons. For example, some people just rate everything lower than others, or maybe they were distracted that day, or whatever. Also, men tend to score lower even though we know just as many are born with the trait. Somehow taking the test seems to affect men differently. Still, most people are not in the middle, but either have the trait or do not.

[level A]DOES Describes It

When I wrote **Psychotherapy and the Highly Sensitive Person in 2011** (to help therapists understand us better, including that our trait is not an illness or flaw), I created the acronym I already mentioned in order to help therapists assess for this trait. I've come to like it as a way of describing both us and the research about us.

[Level B]D is for Depth of Processing

At the foundation of the trait of high sensitivity is the tendency to process information more deeply. When people are given a phone number and have no way to write it down, they will probably try to process it in some way in order to remember it, by repeating it many times, thinking of patterns or meanings in the digits, or noticing the

numbers' similarity to something else. If you don't process it in some way you know you will forget it. HSPs simply process everything more, relating and comparing what they notice to their past experience with other similar things. They do it whether they are aware of it or not. When we decide without knowing how we came to that decision, we call this intuition, and HSPs have good (but not infallible!) intuition. When you make a decision consciously, you may notice that you are slower than others because you think over all the options so carefully. That's depth of processing too.

Studies supporting the depth of processing aspect of the trait have compared the brain activation of sensitive and non-sensitive people doing various perceptual tasks. **Research by Jadzia Jagiellowicz** found that the highly sensitive use more of those parts of the brain associated with "deeper" processing of information, especially on tasks that involve noticing subtleties. **In another study, by ourselves and others**, sensitive and non-sensitive persons were given perceptual tasks that were already known to be difficult (require more brain activation or effort) depending on the culture a person is from. The non-sensitive persons showed the usual difficulty, but the highly sensitive subjects' brains apparently did not have this difficulty, regardless of their culture. It was as if they found it natural to look beyond their cultural expectations to how things "really are."

Research by Bianca Acevedo and her associates has shown more brain activation in HSPs than others in an area called the insula, a part of the brain that integrates moment to moment knowledge of inner states and emotions, bodily position, and outer events. Some have called it the seat of consciousness. If we are more aware of what is going around inside and outside, this would be exactly the result one would expect.

[Level B]O is for Overstimulation

If you are going to notice every little thing in a situation, and if the situation is complicated (many things to remember), intense (noisy, cluttered, etc.), or goes on too long (a two-hour commute), it seems obvious that you will also have to wear out sooner from having to process so much. Others, not noticing much or any of what you have, will not tire as quickly. They may even think it quite strange that you find it too much to sightsee all day and go to a nightclub in the evening. They might talk blithely on when you need them to be quiet a moment so that you can have some time just to think, or they might enjoy an "energetic" restaurant or a party when you can hardly bear the noise. Indeed this is often the behavior we and others have noticed most—that HSPs are easily stressed by overstimulation (including social stimulation), or having learned their lesson, that they avoid intense situations more than others do.

A recent study by Friederike Gerstenberg in Germany compared sensitive and non-sensitive people on a task of deciding whether or not a T turned in various ways was hidden among a great many Ls turned various ways on a computer screen. HSPs were faster and more accurate, but also more stressed than others after doing the task. Was it the perceptual effort or the emotional effect of being in the experiment? Whatever the reason, they were feeling stressed. Just as we say a piece of metal shows stress when it is overloaded, so do we.

High sensitivity, however, is not mainly about being distressed by high levels of stimuli, as some have suggested, although that naturally happens when too much comes at us. Be careful not to mix up being an HSP with some problem condition: Sensory discomfort can by itself be a sign of disorder due to problems with sensory processing rather than having unusually good sensory processing. For example, sometimes persons with autistic spectrum disorders complain of sensory overload, but at other times they underreact. Their problem seems to be a difficulty recognizing where to focus attention and what to ignore. When speaking with someone, they may find the person's face no more important to look at than the pattern on the floor or the type of light bulbs in the room. Naturally they can complain intensely about being overwhelmed by stimulation. They may even be more aware of subtleties, but in social situations especially they are more often noticing something irrelevant, whereas HSPs would be paying more attention to subtle facial expressions, at least when not overaroused.

[Level B] E is for Emotional Reactivity

Data from surveys and experiments had already found some evidence that HSPs react more to both positive and negative experiences, but *a series of studies done by Jadzia Jagiellowicz* found that HSPs particularly react more than non-HSPs to pictures with a "positive valence." This was even more true if they had had a good childhood. In her studies of the brain, this reaction to positive pictures was not only in the areas associated with the initial experience of strong emotions, but also in "higher" areas of thinking and perceiving, in some of the same areas as those found in the depth-of-processing brain studies. This stronger reaction to positive pictures being even more enhanced by a good childhood fits with a *new concept suggested by Michael Pluess and Jay Belsky*, the idea of "vantage sensitivity," which they created in order to highlight the specific potential for sensitive people to benefit from positive circumstances and interventions.

E is also for empathy. *In another study, by Bianca Acevedo*, sensitive and non-sensitive persons looked at photos of both strangers and loved ones expressing happiness, sadness, or a neutral feeling. In all situations, when there was emotion in the photo, sensitive persons showed increased activation in the insula, but also more activity in

their mirror neuron system, especially when looking at the happy faces of loved ones. *The brain's mirror neurons* were only discovered in the last twenty years or so. When we are watching someone else do something or feel something, this clump of neurons fires in the same way as some of the neurons in the person we are observing. As an example, the same neurons fire, to varying degrees, whether we are kicking a soccer ball, see someone else kicking a soccer ball, hear the sound of someone kicking a soccer ball, or hear or say the word "kick." Not only do these amazing neurons help us learn through imitation, but in conjunction with the other areas of the brain that were especially active for HSPs, they help us know others' intentions and how they feel. Hence they are largely responsible for the universal human capacity for empathy. We do not just know how someone else feels, but actually feel that way ourselves to some extent. This is very familiar to sensitive people. Anyone's sad faces tended to generate more activity in these mirror neurons in HSPs than others. When seeing photos of their loved ones being unhappy, sensitive persons also showed more activation in areas suggesting they wanted to do something, to act, even more than in areas involving empathy (perhaps we learn to cool down our intense empathy in order to help). But overall, brain activation indicating empathy was stronger in HSPs than non-HSPs when looking at photos of faces showing strong emotion of any type.

There is a common misunderstanding that emotions cause us to think illogically. But recent scientific thinking, reviewed by psychologist *Roy Baumeister and his colleagues*, has placed emotion at the center of wisdom. One reason is that most emotion is felt after an event, which apparently serves to help us remember what happened and learn from it. The more upset we are by a mistake, the more we think about it and will be able to avoid it the next time. The more delighted we are by a success, the more we think and talk about it and how we did it, causing us to be more likely to be able to repeat it.

Other studies discussed by Baumeister that explore the contribution of emotion to clear thinking find that unless people have some emotional reason to learn something, they do not learn it very well or at all. This is one reason why it is easier to learn a foreign language in the country where it is spoken—we are highly motivated to find our way, converse when spoken to, and generally not seem foolish. From this point of view, it would seem almost impossible for a highly sensitive person to process things deeply without having stronger emotional reactions to motivate them. And remember, when HSPs react more, it is as much or more to positive emotions, such as curiosity, anticipation of success (using that short cut others don't know about), a pleasant desire for something, satisfaction, joy, contentedness. Perhaps everyone reacts strongly to negative situations, but maybe HSPs have

evolved so that we especially relish a good outcome and figure out more than others how to make it happen. I imagine that we can plan an especially good birthday celebration, anticipating the happiness it will bring.

[Level B] S is for Sensing the Subtle

Most of the studies already cited required perceiving subtleties. This is often what is most noticeable to us personally, the little things we notice that others miss. Given that, and because I called the trait high sensitivity, many have thought this is the heart of the trait. (To correct this confusion and emphasize the role of processing, we used “sensory *processing* sensitivity” as its more formal, scientific designation.) However, this trait is not so much about extraordinary senses—after all, there are sensitive people who have poor eyesight or hearing. True, some sensitive people report that one or more senses are very acute, but even in these cases it could be that they process the sensory information more carefully rather than having something unusual about their eyes, nose, skin, taste buds, or ears. Again, the brain areas that are more active when sensitive people perceive are those that do the more complex processing of sensory information. Not so much the areas that recognize alphabet letters by their shape or even that read words, but the areas that catch the subtle meaning of words.

Our awareness of subtleties is useful in an infinite number of ways, from simple pleasure in life to strategizing our response based on our awareness of others’ nonverbal cues (that they may have no idea they are giving off) about their mood or trustworthiness. Of course, on the other hand, when we are worn out we may be the least aware of anything, subtle or gross, except our own need for a break. This brings us to an important point.

[level A] Every Highly Sensitive Person is Different, and Different at Different Times

DOES is a wonderful general guideline for understanding high sensitivity, but it is not infallible. Depending on how we are feeling, we may not be reflecting on our behavior or noticing subtleties even as much as the non-HSPs around us. We also differ from each other. ***People have other traits***, different histories, and are just different. In our enthusiasm to identify ourselves as a group—even as a misunderstood minority—we do not want to forget that we are not identical by any means. In particular, we are not all, or all the time, aware, conscientious, wonderful people!

Take O for easily overstimulated. Two sensitive people may behave quite differently when being bothered by loud noise or rude, upsetting behavior by others. One may rarely complain or be seen being bothered by such things because this person avoids such situations or quietly exits them. He or she will not, for example, stay in a job if noise, rudeness, or other annoyances will be present. If this HSP cannot escape the problems, he or she quietly

tolerates them until they can be corrected. Other HSPs, usually with a more stressful past, will feel more victimized and upset and at the same time be less able to place themselves in the right environments and avoid the wrong ones. Maybe they feel they have to please others or prove something. In the work place, they may not quit a job until a crisis occurs, so that everyone working there knows about their “over” sensitivity.

A study done by Bhavini Shrivastava of HSPs in an Information Technology firm in India found that they felt more stressed than others by their work environment, but were actually seen as more productive than others by their managers. If we assume that those HSPs whose performance had suffered from stress had already quit or been let go, the remaining HSPs (who were older and longer on the job) apparently were quietly adapting, perhaps with special considerations from their supervisors, and contributing their depth of processing and awareness of subtleties to their company. So we see two (or more) types of HSPs--able to manage or not, due to other facets of their personality. Or in other instances, two (or more types) of situations—a little stressful, so that HSPs in that situation seem like strong people who find ways to adapt that others miss, or hopelessly stressful, and so that they cannot adapt and seem weak.

[level A]Final Thoughts

Studying high sensitivity has been an amazing journey for me. It began with a simple curiosity about something someone else said about me. I did some interviews of people who thought they might be highly sensitive just to see what it was, with no further research plans and definitely no intention of writing a book for the public. Then as I like to put it, I found I was walking down a street and a parade began to form behind me, a parade of people who were highly sensitive and had never heard the term before.

Over and over I am asked, “How could you discover a new trait?” The answer is that sensitivity is not new, but just difficult to observe by watching how people behave, which is usually how psychology proceeds. Hence psychologists and people in general were coming up with names for it that were close but not quite on it, such as shyness and introversion. We make it especially hard for others to observe our trait because we are so responsive to our environments that we can be something like chameleons when around others, doing whatever it takes to fit in. I happened to be in the position to be both a curious scientist and a highly sensitive person, who could know this experience from the inside. Still, as I said in the original Preface, even for me to focus on my own sensitivity required someone else to comment on it in me first, after I had an “over” reaction to a medical procedure.

When we are visible, the most obvious thing we do is “over” react compared to others--the O of being overstimulated and the E of stronger emotional reactions. But then we are a minority, so of course we are above average here and not reacting as most people do. It's the more noticeable O and E that have made it seem to our self and others that we have a flaw. Further, those HSPs with a troubled past have less control over their reactions, and hence the trait becomes associated with people having difficulties. The few observable things we do that would indicate D and S, depth of processing and awareness of subtleties, can be easily overlooked or misunderstood. For example, if we are seen taking our time before entering a situation or making a decision, that can seem, again, to be different, a potential problem, and therefore a flaw. It is easy to overlook how good those decisions can be when finally made. Further, this sort of slowness can be caused by many things besides sensitivity, such as fear or even low intelligence. It's what's going on inside, out of sight, that most clearly sorts the highly sensitive minority from others. Thank goodness for these new ways of doing brain research that show these differences, and for all of you who have stepped forward and said, yes, that's what goes on inside of me, too.

So let's celebrate! Maybe with a parade!